



CAPTivations

Success Stories in Prevention

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Topeka Safe Streets (KS)

When Rev. David Fulton was still a new minister at Trinity Lutheran Church in Topeka, Kansas, in January of 1994, he was called to perform a funeral for a young person who had been murdered. He saw too much violence and wanted to do something to make Topeka a safer place to live.

Fulton turned to his twin brother, who still lived in Tacoma, Washington, where he had attended junior high, high school, and college. His brother told him about the Safe Streets program there, and sent him a packet of information. Fulton got together a committee to discuss the idea of incorporating a similar Safe Streets program in Topeka. The committee liked the idea and, with some funds from the Fraternal Order of Police, flew in some mobilizers from Tacoma to conduct a day-long workshop in May 1995 on how Safe Streets works.

Since then, Safe Streets of Topeka/Shawnee County has held over 300 community meetings and shut down over 70 drug houses in Topeka and surrounding Shawnee County. It has also held workshops for youth each semester on life choices and leadership, and worked with businesses on various drug and violence prevention policies, reducing gasoline drive-offs, and addressing methamphetamine precursor ingredients.

"We're not city government," said Sally Zellers, Safe Streets director. "We're still seen as a neutral agency people can call on to help problem solve."

Safe Streets is best known in the community for mobilizing neighborhoods to band together and shut down known drug houses. Zellar said that the shutting down of drug houses may be the most visible work Safe Streets does, but neighborhood mobilization means more than that. It means cleaning up the parks and getting rid of junked cars and improving lighting and fencing to keep criminals out and to make the residents, especially the children, feel safer.

Still, it is often the crisis of a drug house in the neighborhood that prompts a

frightened person to call Safe Streets for help, Zellers said.

When the Safe Streets team mobilizes the first meeting, they bring together not only the neighbors, but also police officers, school officials, and others who have a stake in making sure the neighborhood stays safe. The mobilizers discuss with the neighbors what they have seen first hand, to try to ascertain that what they are seeing really is a drug house and not something else.

If the Safe Street mobilizers determine that what the neighbors are seeing really might be a drug house, the mobilizers work with them to come up with a plan of action, dividing up the work into small, manageable pieces that allow everyone to feel a part of the process. One neighbor might be assigned the task of jotting down tag numbers of cars that stop by the suspected drug house, while another might manage the phone or e-mail tree.

No one feels alone in the battle against drugs and violence, because now they feel they have their neighbors on their side, Zellers points out.

"It's 300 of them versus 125,000 of us," Fulton observes. "It's time we started acting that way."

Since it takes time to gather sufficient information to shut down a drug house – three months is a quick turn-around time from initial phone call to police raid – Safe Streets makes sure the neighborhood meetings continue and that quick victories are achieved. These meetings might focus on things the neighbors can do to make the area safer, such as installing wood fencing, bringing in barking dogs, and installing certain kinds of locks.

Other projects Safe Streets might help the neighborhood with include neighborhood recycling and teaching the neighbors on how to properly document problems they see on rental properties. Older neighborhoods might even host open houses during the holidays, showcasing beautifully decorated refurbished homes.

Zellers said it's not just the "bad" neighborhoods that fall victim to drug houses.

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Middle class neighborhoods are just as susceptible to having a meth lab move in.

The media may count Safe Streets' successes by the number of drug houses it helps to shut down, but the real success, Zellers points out, comes afterwards, when Safe Streets facilitators move out and the neighbors continue to work together to keep the neighborhood safe.

Besides working with neighborhoods, Safe Streets works with landlords and other renters through its Crime Free Multi-Housing Program. Zellers said one of Topeka's police officers had seen a similar program in another community and suggested it. The semi-annual program teaches landlords about code compliance, narcotics, crime prevention through environmental design, tenant screening, eviction laws, and how to work with the neighbors.

"A lot of these landlords didn't know about these codes," Zellers said. "A lot of them became landlords by default. Mom and Dad died and they ended up with the house."

Safe Streets also has several programs for youth, foremost among them being the Young Citizens Academy. The leaders of Safe Streets completed the Topeka Police Department's Citizen's Academy in 1996, in which they learned what police did; they thought a similar program for youth would be a good idea. After some discussion, they decided that eighth graders would be the best age for such a program, Zellers said, because that seemed to be the age when kids began to be lost to bad choices.

The academy, which began in March 1997 and is held every semester, looks at goal setting, life choices and consequences, citizenship, the court system, presentation skills, and group leadership. Albert Guorodo, a local Olympic lightweight boxer, speaks to the kids about his experiences in setting goals to achieve his successes in boxing. Inmates also have been brought in to speak to the students about the consequences of their bad choices.

The students who are chosen are neither high achievers nor considered at risk, but are students who, if given the opportunity, can develop leadership skills and

become more involved in the community.

The first group of kids who participated in the five Saturdays of the Young Citizen's Academy, Zellers said, asked when it was over, "Is that it?" Their enthusiasm to continue to be involved in drug-free activities led to the formation of Student Taking Action in Topeka, or STAT. STAT members—mainly graduates of the Young Citizens Academy in grades nine through 12—pledge to be drug and alcohol free and go into middle schools to talk to the students there about drugs and alcohol. They also serve as leaders for the Young Citizens Academy.

Safe Street's latest teen project is the Teen Leadership Academy, held for the first time in the summer of 2001. The participants—kids from the Young Citizens Academy and some of their friends—learned

about team building, working with local government and the media, and community service projects, in preparation to become leaders as they become adults.

After starting with a small city grant, Safe Streets had to move on to a county grant when it got a call for help from a neighborhood outside the city limits, Zellers said. It was either get the money to help mobilize the neighborhood in the outlying area, or not help the area, and Safe Streets could hardly say no. Safe Streets formerly had a CSAP grant and now has an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) grant and funds from the local United Way.

Safe Streets measures its outcomes based on the number of community changes it has brought about, designed to reduce risk for substance abuse and crime. Between January 1996 and December 2000, Safe Streets has logged 452 such changes, including the closing of over 70 drug houses. These changes tended to concentrate in relatively more distressed areas of Topeka: downtown, neighborhoods near downtown, and in the southeastern parts of the city.

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Success Story

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Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
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Decision Support System
www.preventiondss.org

Join Together
www.jointogther.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
www.cadca.org

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